

## **Ordinary Days @ Tesseract Theatre**

Music and Lyrics by Adam Gwon

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In the wake of the pandemic, theatre companies all over St. Louis have realized that life is too short to keep doing the same types of shows over and over again. Many theatres have challenged themselves to go in bold directions, to tell stories in ways that they have never tried before. One such company is Tesseract Theatre, which has focused its twelve years of operation on original and rarely-produced straight plays; now, they are taking a leap of faith by producing an entire season of musicals for the first time ever. The opener of their all-musical season is *Ordinary Days*, an uplifting musical by Adam Gwon, a show that definitely lives up to that moniker.

Set in New York City in 2005, *Ordinary Days* tells the intersecting stories of two couples whose relationships develop in the unlikeliest of ways as they struggle to navigate the Big Apple. The first is the enemies-to-friends relationship between Warren and Deb. Warren is a lifelong New Yorker, a starving artist busking (and pet-sitting) for a fellow artist who has been incarcerated on vandalism charges. Deb is an unsatisfied graduate student, an easily excitable small-town girl who can't sit in one place. These two start the show as perfect strangers. While on the New York City subway, Deb accidentally leaves behind the notebook containing her graduate thesis on Virginia Woolf. The notebook is pretty quickly found by Warren, who finds Deb's contact information and arranges for them to meet up at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in a manner that can be politely described as "convoluted." Once they finally meet, Deb's annoyance with Warren trying to make this simple exchange a momentous occasion causes her to make a scene, shouting at him for wasting her time. After Warren becomes visibly upset with her, Deb apologizes by offering him Starbucks. From there, the two go down a rocky journey of reconciliation where they realize their day-to-day routines are actually just as beautiful as their lofty "Big Picture" life goals.

The second couple we meet is the boyfriend-girlfriend duo of Jason and Claire, who both start the show by moving in together. They both try to take their relationship more seriously by doing the stereotypical sightseeing that couples in New York often do, but neither of them is really feeling it; Claire finds the city unremarkable, and Jason keeps getting distracted by little things. While on their way to a party, when their frustrations with the Big Apple come to a tipping point, Jason abruptly proposes to Claire. Startled by Jason's commitment, Claire is forced to confront why she is so noncommittal, and why she is unhappy with the city she calls home, revealing an incredibly tragic backstory that definitely warrants the 2005 setting.

The two couples only meet each other once: during the show's ending, which is so chocked full of sentimentality that it borders on being schmaltzy. But I think that's the point. In fact, I actually kind of respect this show for that. *Ordinary Days* is a very modern, very humanist musical about

just how damned beautiful life is. It's a story about how living a fulfilling life means accepting that bad things are going to happen to you, and that should make you appreciate your life's golden moments that much more. Tesseract Theatre's production does a great job of being joyous without being saccharine. The show is entirely sung-through with little to no dialogue, and director Elisabeth Wurm stages every song at a rapid clip. Wurm does an excellent job of capturing the show's intended emotional response in a way that feels effortless. The show's solo piano accompaniment is proficiently played by musical director Zach Neumann. The stage is simply set with a table, some chairs, a few boxes, and a raised platform accessed by a spiral staircase; all of the locations are portrayed by impressive projections designed by Taylor Gruenloh, augmented by Brittanie Gunn's lights and Phillip Evans's sound.

Warren and Deb are very energetic characters, and they could easily be played as goofy stereotypes. Jacob Schmidt and Lauren Tenenbaum do give their roles a great deal of energy, but they only go over the top when the situation calls for it, which results in some very admirable moments of restraint from both of them. Schmidt has a very firm grasp on Warren's deliberate cheerfulness that is always undercut by an easygoing approachability that plays very well off of Deb's anxiousness, played with crisp conviction by Tenenbaum. Both actors have excellent chemistry together, creating some really fun moments of vocal and physical comedy. On the opposite end of the spectrum are Jason and Claire, characters who hold very serious emotional trauma; Michael Lowe and Brittani O'Connell treat their turmoil with the gravity that it deserves, even allowing their singing voices to shout and crack with intense, vulnerable emotion in ways one would not expect.

In an age where everyone is a cynic, where everyone flocks to see media that makes fun of itself, I think we need to see more stories like *Ordinary Days*: small, intimate stories that are unironically sentimental. It's a surprisingly comforting musical that gives you permission to feel genuine happiness and an appreciation for the simple joys of life. Tesseract Theatre has given us a nice little boost of joy with *Ordinary Days*, and I look forward to seeing the rest of their all-musical season.